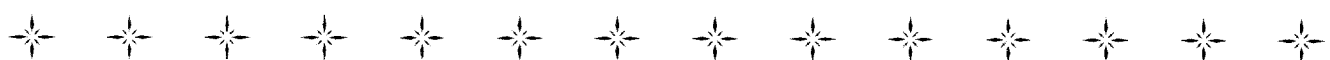


For the Love of Fine Books



Antebellum Library Companies in Virginia

DAVID SCOTT TURK

Antebellum Virginians valued their books as they did their money. A fine private library on the premises was a source of pride for a Virginia gentleman, often measuring the importance of family fortunes and finding mention in many wills. Even earlier, in colonial times, William Byrd II and John Mercer of Marlborough were famous for their grand libraries totaling thousands of titles. Thomas Jefferson owned one of the best collections of books in the New World. Col. William

Fleming, a Botetourt County physician who had seen military service with George Washington's Virginia Regiment from 1755 to 1762 and during the Revolutionary War, had a personal library of 324 volumes that included a Bible, psalms, works by Shakespeare and Pope and Voltaire, poetry, anatomies, histories of Virginia and Scotland, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, equine medicine, and the laws of Virginia, among other subjects and titles. However, for most people, a book, let alone a large

library, was a rare commodity. Of 100 libraries belonging to Virginians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, about half contained twenty-five or fewer books. Sometimes such modest personal collections provided the nucleus of organizations ignited by antebellum book-lovers, who

Opposite: The Lyceum, which housed the Alexandria Library Company from 1837 to 1937. Above: Bookplate from the Alexandria Library Company (Both: Library of Virginia)

came together in private library companies for research, study, reading, the promotion of knowledge, and socializing. Their big challenges were how to provide other citizens with access to books and how to increase and maintain their collections. A look at organizations in Alexandria, Fincastle, and Lexington shows how the readers of those Virginia communities fared in the endeavor.

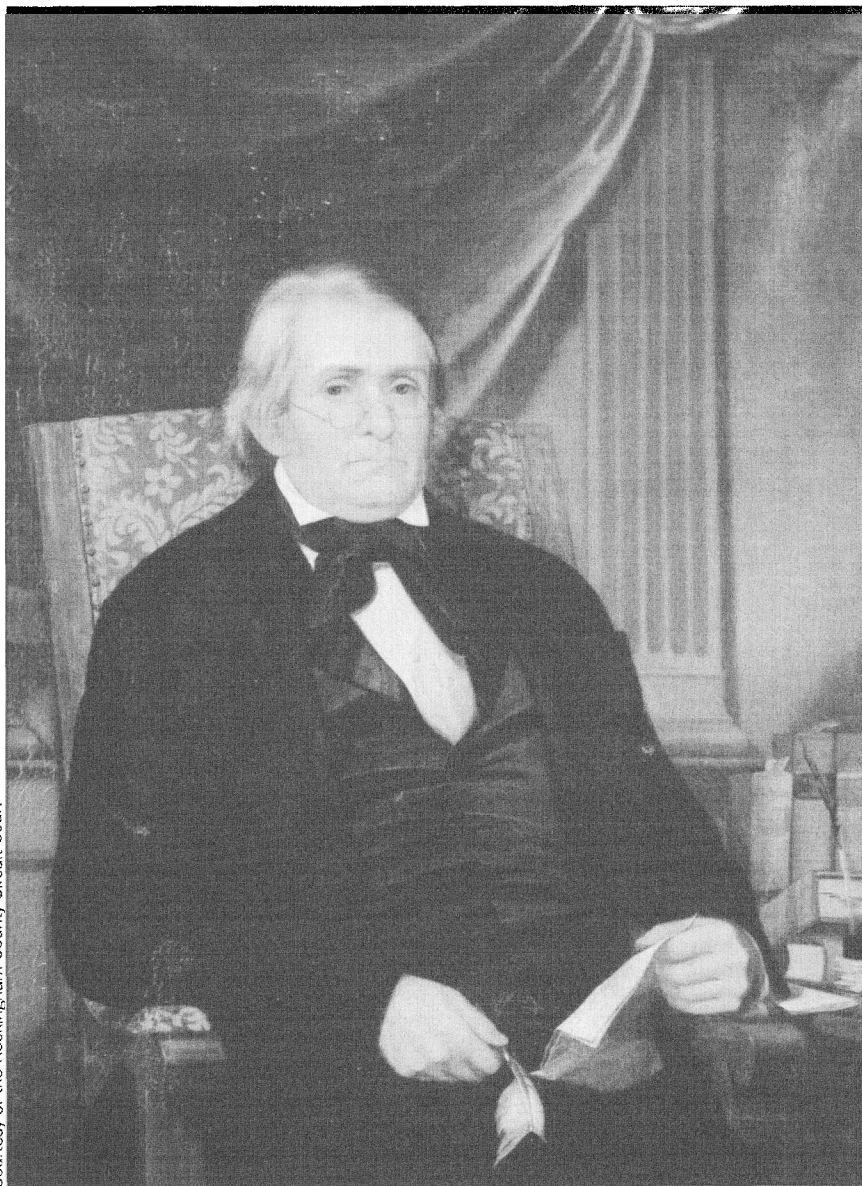
The model for Virginia's library companies emerged in 1731 in Philadelphia, when the

young Benjamin Franklin and other artisans, all of modest means, started the Library Company of Philadelphia. They charged an initial investment of forty shillings per member and ten shillings a year. The company's popularity, growth, and transformation inspired similar organizations throughout the colonies and, later, the states. In Richmond in the early 1850s, physician John P. Little decried the local library as "one of the most insignificant ones that could be collected in any place as large

and prosperous as Richmond." Little's remedy called for basing the city library on the Library Company of Philadelphia, a "fit model for our imitation in this respect."

The first notable library company in Virginia began on 24 July 1794, when a group of citizens met at John Wise's tavern in Alexandria and formed the Alexandria Library Company. They chose eleven directors for the board and officers, including Dr. James Muir, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church, as president, an office he would hold for the next nineteen years. The organization became the model for later Virginia subscription facilities, with its fee membership (\$5.00 for the first year, \$4.00 for each year thereafter) and a pay-for-loan policy to non-members (one shilling per week per book). In 1797, the board and directors of the fledgling company pronounced themselves "desirous of promoting the influence which they conceive eminently calculated to diffuse useful knowledge, establish the morals of the rising generation, and afford rational entertainment for a vacant hour, [and] earnestly recommend it to the attention and support of their fellow citizens." Likely basing it on older models such as Philadelphia, the readers of Alexandria ushered into Virginia the era of the proprietary social library.

Such institutions generally were confined to larger towns where broader patronage was likely, such as Richmond, Lexington, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Fincastle. Later libraries were established at Romney and in Rockingham County, all private efforts stemming from educational or political endeavors. For example, the Franklin Society, of Lexington, developed out of a Democratic-Republican society



Courtesy of the Rockingham County Circuit Court

Opposite: Daniel Smith introduced a bill of incorporation for the Rockingham Library Company in 1806. Right: Charles Peale Polk, Adam Stephen Dandridge Sr., ca. 1799–1800. Dandridge, of Jefferson County (now in West Virginia), was a young gentleman of seventeen or eighteen when he posed for this portrait with, presumably, the family library as a backdrop.

founded around 1800 by some of the city's leading citizens to promote literacy and to create a place for speeches and debate. Its first name was Belles Lettres. A similar group, the Lexington Library Company, began around the same time, but as Belles Lettres waxed, the other company waned and eventually ceased operations in 1818. Belles Lettres met every Saturday, when a group gathered to converse about current events in the spirit of learning. The members changed the name several times before settling on the Franklin Society in 1811. Two years later, the society initiated a formal library component to supplement its goals and became the Franklin Society and Library Company.

The Fincastle organization had more basic beginnings, originating when a system of informal borrowing from the libraries of local residents ceased to work effectively. On 5 August 1820, one exasperated book owner placed a message in the *Herald of the Valley*: "It is the wish of the subscriber that those who hold books which do not belong to them, to send them home." The residents of Fincastle needed a library, so in early 1822, the Fincastle Library Company convened simply to circulate its goodly supply of books to a wider readership.

In their early years, library companies usually lacked permanent housing for their collections.

In 1800, the Franklin Society (under its first name, Belles Lettres) stored its humble collection at John Ruff's hattery in Lexington. The Alexandria Library Company kept its tomes in at least five buildings, beginning with John Wise's tavern, then moving to Edward Stabler's apothecary shop and three more stations until the library found a permanent home on the first floor of the new Lyceum building in 1837. Companies sometimes used the librarian's home or place of work for convenience. The Fin-

castle Library Company initially moved its collections from private homes to the local newspaper office, then in March 1823 to F. B. Miller's legal office, where the librarian, J. T. Logan, checked books in and out from noon to 1:00 on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays.

The tastes and backgrounds of the readers influenced the contents of the companies' libraries. German printers from Pennsylvania, such as Jacob D. Dietrick, who settled in Staunton, had emigrated south into the Shenan-

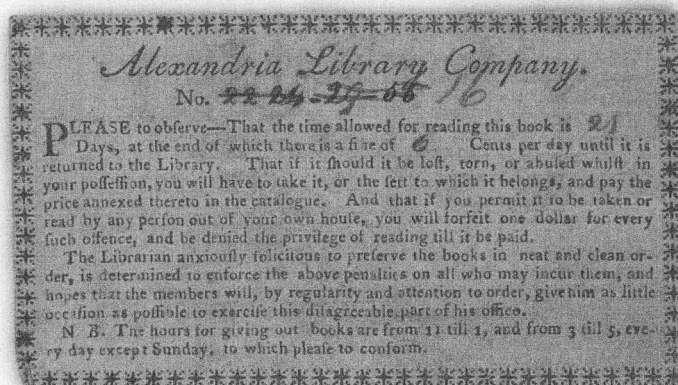
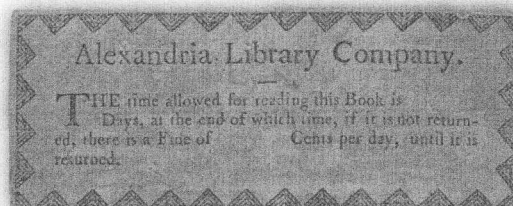


Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia

doah Valley and widely circulated their books and newspapers, printed in both German and English, throughout the state. Likewise, the Scots-Irish inhabitants of the valley towns heavily influenced the libraries in that part of the state. In 1822, its first year of operation, the stock of the Fincastle Library Company contained 198 volumes, including histories like *Irish Emigrants*, *Irish Revolution in '98*, *Scottish Chiefs*, and novels such as Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*, *Kenilworth*, and *Ivanhoe*. A tome on the Lewis and Clark expedition and *Campbell's Travels* rounded out a section on travel accounts. Books on famous Virginians were well represented too, with the *Life of Patrick Henry* and *Life of Washington* on the shelves. A smattering of other titles included *British Theatre*, *Dickinson's Geography*, and *History of Charles XII*.

The Alexandria Library Company emphasized quality American and English works. The readership included sea captains as well as landed gentlemen. Members of the former vocation preferred novels to accounts of science and philosophy, with *Roderick Random* and *Peregrin Pickle* popular titles. By contrast, in landlocked Lexington, members of the Franklin Society enjoyed Herman Melville's oceanic adventures *Omoo* and *Typee*. Alexandria also devoted much space to biographies and histories, in 1815 boasting 2,291 volumes, including James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* and *The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley*. Down in Lexington, the Franklin Society counted among its first volumes a good amount of

philosophical and historical material, including Benjamin Franklin's *Life and Essays* and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Between 1829 and 1846, the percentage of biographies in the Franklin collection increased from a slender 6 percent to a substantial 28 percent. "The composition of the Franklin Society library . . . directly reflected the reading tastes of male middle-class Lexingtonians," writes



Lexington Va.

March 11, 1857.

E. H. J. McCampbell,

President of the Franklin Society.

Dear Sir

Circumstances
being such as to prevent my
discharging to my own sat-
isfaction, the duties devolving
on me as a member of the
Franklin Society, I hereby resign
my membership.

In thus withdrawing from
your Honorable Body, it
gives me pleasure to know
that it is with cordial friend-
ship for its members and
best wishes for the welfare
of the Society.

I am sir,

Very Respectfully,

Yours most Obedt. Servt

T. J. Jackson

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME.

This shall certify that *Thos S Campbell* of *Benj S Jordan* is the owner of one share in the "Franklin Society and Library Company of Lexington," and he or his assigns, or the assigns of his legal representatives, is entitled to all the Rights, Privileges and Immunities of a Shareholder according to the Constitution and Laws of said Society



In Testimony whereof I
Isaac M. Nutt
President of said Society, have
herunto subscribed my Name,
and affixed the common Seal of
said Society, the *fifth* day of
March Eighteen Hundred and
Fifty nine *J M Nutt Pres.*

John W Fuller Librarian

Share certificates for the Franklin Society and Library Company, of Lexington

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME.

This shall certify that *Samuel S Campbell* of *Wm M Moore* is the owner of one share in the "Franklin Society and Library Company of Lexington," and he or his assigns, or the assigns of his legal representatives, is entitled to all the Rights, Privileges and Immunities of a Shareholder according to the Constitution and Laws of said Society



In Testimony whereof I
Isaac S. M. Nutt
President of said Society, have
herunto subscribed my Name,
and affixed the common Seal of
said Society, the *24th* day of
February Eighteen Hundred and
Fifty five *J M Nutt Pres.*

John W Fuller Librarian

donated books, and attended lectures. In Lexington, the Franklin Society was fortunate to have in its active membership wealthy men such as Governor James McDowell, U.S. Senator John H. Adams, and novelist William A. Carruthers. They sustained the membership for a long time, later adding to the roster Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. The Alexandria Library Company boasted among its members George Washington Parke Custis (stepgrandson of George Washington), Bushrod Washington (justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and nephew of Washington), and William Henry Fitzhugh, of Ravensworth, a member of the Continental Congress. Although the Alexandria and Lexington companies did not suffer any shortage of membership, a lack of new members was a regular and real problem in Fincastle, where the newspaper regularly extolled the value of learning through books.

In April 1822, the Fincastle company quickly signed up a newcomer to town who, though supportive of libraries and literature, was dubious about the survival of the institution. However, he visited "the room where the Library is kept, and to my astonishment, discovered a library consisting upwards of 150 volumes, actually in existence! mostly of the best works in the English language, on various subjects," he told the *Herald of the Valley*. "Such a library at the least estimate could not be purchased for less than \$300. A sum that most of us cannot easily spare; but for the sum of \$5, each subscriber to this institution and his family, enjoy all the advantages that can arise from such a library as if it even belonged exclusively to himself." He signed himself "A Farmer," perhaps indicating that membership was not confined

only to wealthy gentlemen. In fact, the well-regarded librarian of the Franklin Society, John W. Fuller, who served in that post for forty-six years, made his living as a saddler.

The survival of the library companies also depended on politics. To receive official recognition, they needed to petition the General Assembly for a charter so that the company could issue shares of stock. The Alexandria Library Company was incorporated in 1799. The process could sometimes be long and involved, at times lasting several months. In December 1822, the Fincastle Library Company found itself ready for official status. Its six directors—John C. Griffin (president), William A. McDowell, Daniel Meenan, Fleming B. Miller, doctor Timothy M. Patterson, and lawyer James Littlepage Woodville—wrote their pro forma petition in a simple, one-page document, asserting "respectfully . . . that they have associated themselves together with a view to establish a public library in said town which they have in part accomplished, but finding it inconvenient to manage their affairs without an act of incorporation pray that your honorable body will pass an act Incorporating them."

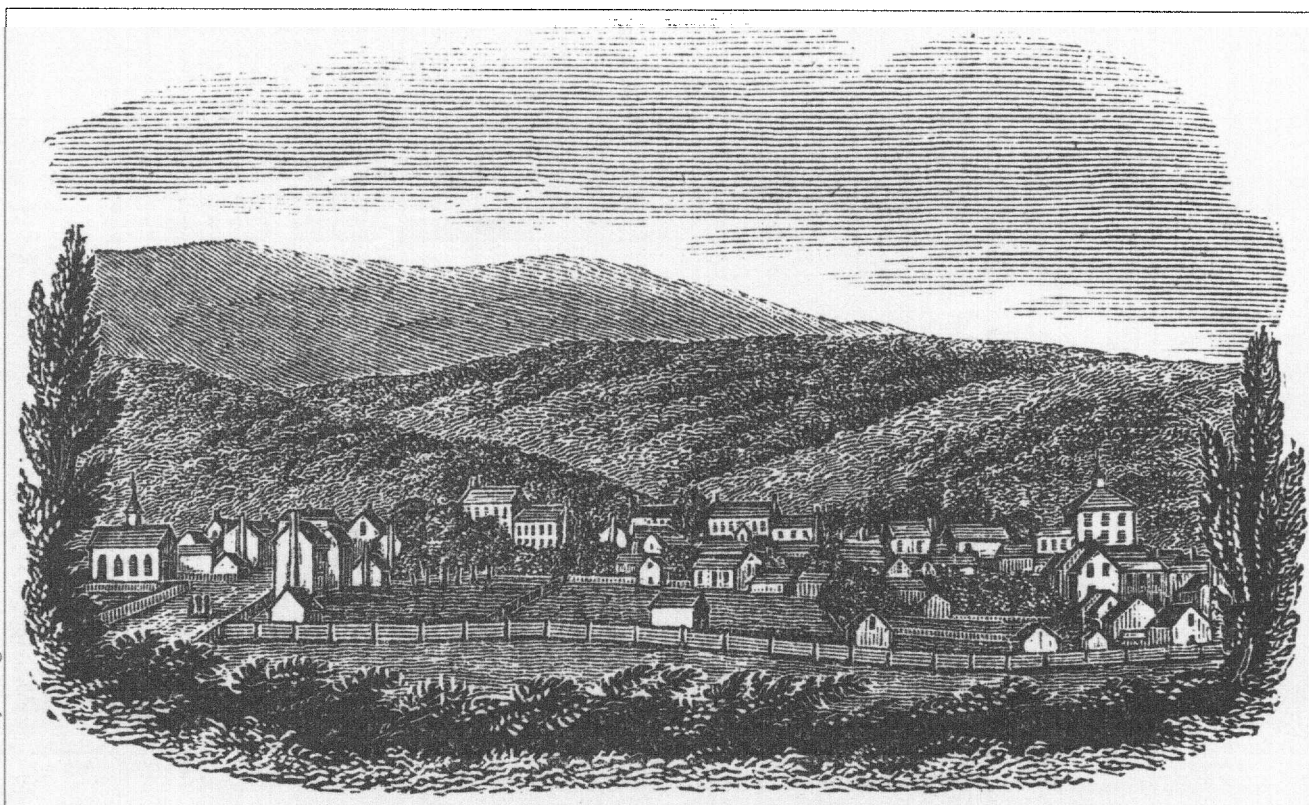
The assembly referred the petition to committee on 12 December 1822 and drew up the bill seven days later. In the 1830s, the company found attempts at renewing the charter more difficult. In Lexington, the Franklin Society and Library Company won approval of its charter in 1816 and again in 1847 and 1870.

The internal workings of a library company, as illustrated by its constitution and goals, often determined its longevity. The Fincastle Library Company's lengthy constitution of 1822 contained

eight primary articles for members, in which it detailed the sale of shares at \$5 each and the need to charge a tax of \$2 per year. Members could pay their dues in acceptable books instead of in cash, and they reserved the first Saturday in March for the general membership meeting to elect officers: president, librarian, treasurer, and five directors. The treasurer collected the company dues, which the president and directors examined as part of their duties. The librarian controlled the inventory and circulation of volumes, was bound to furnish a list of books on hand every Saturday, and set the time the borrower had to return books.

The company's constitution actually contained the general rules. Borrowers could keep a book "one week for every 100 pages such book contains, and when there are an odd number of pages over 50 and under 100, such excess shall count as a full hundred, in estimating the time for keeping it out; if under 50, there is no allowance of time to be made; provided that any volume under fifty pages may be kept a full week." Further, members could not lend out the books from their own homes. Should anyone lose the borrowed book, the borrowing member had to pay the fine. If non-members wanted to use the books, they had to leave ample security in case of loss. The Fincastle Library Company depended heavily upon its subscription fee—and on the integrity of its readership.

The charters of other library companies reflected their intentions to serve as a political entity or as a community pillar. While the Fincastle Library Company based itself on the simple extension of knowledge to its citizens, Lexington's Franklin Society was a status organization derived from



a Democratic-Republican society. During one annual meeting on 17 January (always held on Benjamin Franklin's birthday) at Washington College, the members elected Samuel McDowell Reid as president and appointed William Taylor, Andrew Hays, Valentine M. Mason, and Andrew Herron as officers. A committee of five controlled access to the library by issuing permits, though the librarian maintained the physical facility. The librarian received the handsome sum of thirty dollars per year. An existing subscription fee accentuated the growth of the library stock. Attendance at the meetings was compulsory, with few exceptions: "All members under forty-five years of age shall be compelled to attend the society at the several meetings thereof under the penalty of Twenty five cents unless they reside, or are necessarily at the time of meeting, more than one mile from Lexington, or can give a good excuse for

their absence," read the bylaws.

Membership in the Franklin Society carried an aura of integrity. When a newcomer joined, he promised to "demean myself as an orderly member of society; to make no remarks in derision or contumely . . . to give true excuses for absence, and further that I will support the constitution and laws of this institution whilst I continue a member thereof." The Franklin members also adopted thirteen articles "for the government of the Library," with rules about circulation and fines strikingly similar to those of the Fincastle Library Company, especially those correlating the length of loan with the number of pages.

Other social libraries contained slight differences in their financial and administrative structures. The Alexandria Library Company had an initial fee of \$12 per share, with a subsequent annual fee of \$4. The president

Above: A view of Fincastle, ca. 1845.
Opposite: Alexandria, looking south, ca. 1855

and directors met at the library the first Monday of each March and elected a treasurer and librarian for the upcoming year. The librarian also acted as secretary, keeping a record of the proceedings, posting notices of the annual elections, collecting fines, and turning over the monies to the treasurer on a quarterly basis. Further, the "Laws of the Company" empowered the librarian "to demand such books as have been kept beyond the time allowed for reading; and, (Sundays excepted) give out books from eleven o'clock till one, and from three o'clock till five, every day."

The decline of the private library company followed the advent of public libraries and wider access to the bookshelves of educational institutions. The Alexandria Library Company



moved into the town's Lyceum in 1837, thereby fusing it with the city. In 1937, it transferred the contents of the large reading room to the Lloyd House, where they remain today. The Franklin Society and Library Company endured for many years, but substantial debt and decreases in membership after the Civil War forced the society to swap its 3,800 books to Washington and Lee University for an assumption of debt in July 1891. (The books now reside in the special collections of Washington and Lee's Leyburn Library.) The Fincastle Library Company's demise was assured when one of its principal driving forces, John C. Griffin, died in 1826. The deaths of other leaders followed, and the company perished with them over the next couple of years. More than a century later, a library finally found Fincastle with the opening of a branch of the public Botetourt-Rockbridge Regional Library in

1953. An overall trend toward democratization hastened the end of other such companies.

The legacy of the social library in Virginia was its identity as an integral part of its community. Its demise left communities without a vital means of growth until the arrival of public and educational libraries. In March 1970, the Alexandria Library Company was still active, although since the advent of the public library, members served in the capacity of directors and friends of that institution. President William Francis Smith was realistic when he told members in announcing a lecture by S. Dillon Ripley, secretary of the Smithsonian: "We should like to have a goodly crowd, and it would appear that numbers of people who have been invited automatically through the years are no longer able to come or now reside in Ivy Hill Cemetery." The company essentially merged with the public library and the com-

munity but still beckoned intellectuals and bibliophiles. Its lasting durability evidenced the power of the printed page.

In 1839, P. Calhoun, an officer of the Franklin Society, showed just how pronounced that power was. "It is readily admitted that the great mass of man kind must necessarily be engaged in manual labors or bodily employments, & can never in the proper sense of the term become literary men," he said in a lecture to his fellow members. "But this is not what is desired or aimed at. It is not to make them all literary men, or to unfit them for the duties of real life, that we would extend to them the advantages of a sound education, but to make them intelligent men & useful men." ▮

David Scott Turk, of Fairfax, is the author of "The Great Paint Bank Mining Boom of 1907," which appeared in the Autumn 1997 issue of *Virginia Cavalcade*.